# Nation-building and state support for creole languages: The cases of Haiti and the Seychelles

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Abstract: Only two French-lexified creole languages possess *de jure* official status: Haitian (*kreyòl aysisyen*) in Haiti, and Seychellois (*kreol Seselwa*) in the Seychelles. This paper situates the past and contemporary sociolinguistics of Haitian and Seychellois in their respective homelands. The histories and politics of the two states are examined from their times as European colonies to their present-day as independent states. This will be followed by comparing the current state of the languages through three lenses: education, government, and popular discourse. The status of the creoles in each of those roles is discussed in relation to the other official languages of the states (French in both, along with English in the Seychelles.) The relationship between the creole languages and French is highlighted. I conclude with a discussion on the power of governmental support for creole languages generally, and potential lessons to be learned from the Haitian and Seychellois cases.

*Keywords: state support; French-lexified creoles; Seychellois; Haitian*

## 1    Introduction

The French colonial empire, though still extant, has expanded and contracted over the past six centuries in rhythmic concert with the ebb and flow of global power. Like a wave which crashes against the shoreline, only to recede having distributed new sand, shells, and sea critters onto the beach, the tide of French sovereignty may have retreated but the remnants of its hegemony remain in those places where the *tricouleur* no longer flies. Included among these remnants are the French language and its creole descendants. Despite dozens of French-based creole languages spread out across the planet, including many places where *La Marseillaise* is still the national anthem, in only two localities do these creoles serve as official languages: the republics of Haiti and Seychelles. In spite of being located in separate hemispheres with unique histories, the two present excellent case studies for examining the past and contemporary sociolinguistics of French-based creoles in places where official recognition has been afforded to them. It is the purpose of this paper to situate the status of the Haitian Creole (*kreyòl; kreyòl ayisyen*) and Seychellois Creole (*seselwa; kreol seselwa*) in their respective countries. This will be done by first examining the histories and politics of the two nations from their times as colonial possessions of European powers to their present-day status as independent states and placing the emergence of the creole languages within those contexts. Subsequently, this paper will compare and contrast the current status of the creole languages through three lenses: role in government, role in education, and role in popular discourse, particularly as they relate to the other official languages of the countries (French in both countries,

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additionally English in the Seychelles). It will then conclude on a discussion on the power of governmental support for languages generally especially as it relates to other creole languages.

Before diving into the histories of the two countries and their creoles, it is important to first introduce the languages themselves in their contemporary states. Although both can be included under the umbrella term of "French-based creoles," Haitian is grouped together with other creoles of the Caribbean basin, while Seychellois is classified with those of the Indian Ocean. Over ten million people speak Haitian, in Haiti and in diasporic groups (Spears, 2010, pp. 1-2), whereas it is estimated only around a hundred thousand speak Seychellois (Moumou, 2004, p. 46). For both languages, French is the main lexifier language and has provided the vast majority of their lexical bases. In the case of Seychellois specifically, 98% of its vocabulary has been analyzed to have originated in French (Michaelis & Rosalie, 2013). However, in the case of contributing substrata, Haitian has been influenced primarily by West African languages, specifically the Gbe languages (Spears, 2010, p. 9) while Seychellois has received input from languages of the Indian Ocean, namely Swahili, Malagasy, and Tamil (Michaelis & Rosalie, 2013). Interestingly, despite the geographic and historical differences in their formations, both creoles have made novel use of the word *ape/ap/pe*, which is derived from the French *après* meaning "after," as a means of marking the progressive aspect, such as in examples (1) and (2) below (Klingler, 2003, pp. 264-272).

(1) M         ap      manje,     lèfni   m      va     ale          (Haitian)
    1SG    PROG eat        then   1SG  FUT  go
    *I am eating, then I will leave* (Fattier, 1998, p. 88)

(2) Pyer     pe     manz  mang                       (Seychellois)
    Peter   PROG eat     mango
    *Peter is eating a mango* (Michaelis & Rosalie, 2013)

## 2    Historical background

Haiti's relationship with France, as the progenitor of the Haitian Creole language, began at the close of the 17th century with the Treaty of Ryswick, whereby France was granted the westernmost third of the island of Hispaniola, which had until this point been under complete Spanish control (Fouron, 2010, p. 23). Over the next century, France developed the colony into the world's most prosperous dependency on the backs of a slaved-based plantation economy and earned the moniker *la Perle des Antilles* (Fouron, 2010, p. 24). Haitian Creole was born out of the contact between those French speakers who came to colonize and administer Saint Domingue (as it was then called) and enslaved Africans imported to make up the labour force (Fattier, 2013). Starting in 1791, a series of revolts led by enslaved Africans, their also enslaved descendants, and the progeny of slaves and White slave-owners called *gens libres de couleurs*, ultimately resulted in the end of French rule of Saint Domingue and the independence of Haiti, or *Ayiti*, having been renamed after the indigenous Taino word for the island (Fouron, 2010, pp. 27-30).

The liberation of Haiti opened a new chapter in the country's history, one which could be considered to have persisted to the present day. Following the declaration of independence on behalf of the nation by its first leader, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the remaining White population of Haiti were systematically massacred and expelled in the final act of this successful slave rebellion (Popkin, 2012, p. 137).[2] The massacre was the realization of the worst fears of the upper echelons of European and North American slaveholding society and prompted a global diplomatic embargo

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[2] Save for the Polish ex-soldiers who had fought with the slaves against France and select professionals, who were allowed to stay and live, having been declared "*noirs*".

of the young country, along with economic isolation (Fouron, 2010, pp. 30-34). Over the following two centuries, constant political infighting and repeated foreign interventions (militarily and otherwise) have kept Haiti effectively destitute, and as a consequence, one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere.

In stark contrast, the Seychelles is one of the wealthiest countries in Africa and has had a very different go of things, historically speaking. The archipelago was first colonized in the late 18th century, with French settlers and slaves originating from Mauritius and Eastern Africa coming in from Mauritius (Bollée, 1993, p. 85). It was here, as additional slaves and settlers arrived over the coming decades, that Seychellois Creole was born, though the specifics of the birth are debated. Some assert that Seychellois developed simultaneously with Mauritian Creole and Rodriguez as dialects of the "original" Bourbonnais Creole which came from the island of La Réunion (then called *Île Bourbon*) (Chaudenson, 1974; Bollée, 1977; 1993) However, it is also argued that the creoles of the Rodriguez and the Seychelles originated with a Mauritian Creole that arose separately from the creole of La Réunion. This second theory rests on the difference in settlement patterns, particularly as they relate to the slave trade, on La Réunion and Mauritius and the strong similarities between Mauritian, Rodriguez, and Seychellois Creoles and dissimilarities with Réunion Creole, which has been argued to not even been a creole language at all, and more identifiable as a French dialect (Baker and Corne, 1982; Fleischmann, 2008, pp. 37-44).

Although the French were the first to settle the islands, the Seychelles came under the control of the British Empire in 1810 and remained as such until their independence. Like Haiti, the economy of the Seychelles was built on plantations which were operated by enslaved people, although the practice was brought to an end in the mid-19th century (Bollée, 1993, p. 85). Unlike Haiti, the islands became sovereign through a peaceful process of negotiations in the 1970's, with independence coming on June 28, 1976. A coup-d'état less than a year later saw a one-party state emerge and reign until the 1990's, after which point the archipelago became a stable multi-party democracy (McAteer, 2000). The cornerstone of the Seychelles' economy has been tourism since the completion of Mahé International Airport in 1981, with 20% of the country's GDP dependent on it nowadays (SNSB, 2007; Laversuch, 2008, p. 1).

### 3    Status of the languages in government, education, and popular discourse

Today, both creole languages are recognized as "official" in each country, though as in the case of their respective economic situations there is a chasm between how that actually manifests as it relates to usage and promotion (or demotion) in the government. In the case of Seychelles, this official recognition came quickly following independence, in 1979 at the behest of the islands' post-coup president France-Albert René (Bollée, 1993, p. 86). Prior to independence, English was the language of administration and economic life, advanced by the British colonial apparatus, while French was used by the descendants of the original French settlers and the Catholic Church, which counted around 90% of the population among its adherents (Ferguson, 1959; Bollée, 1993). The adoption of a policy of national trilingualism, particularly the elevation of Seychellois to official status, was a conscious decision of the post-coup "revolutionary" government to promote an identity independent of its colonial past and, in the words of President René "… [T]o develop our own culture to enable our people to be dignified and proud" (René, 1977 as cited in Bollée, 1993, p. 87). In 1981, the government went a step further in this process and made *Seselwa* the first national language, with English second, and French third in this codified hierarchy (Fleischmann, 2007). While the state has advanced Seychellois in these ways, it can be argued that full equality between the creole and colonial languages has not yet been met. For example, for

reasons of promoting the Seychelles' economy to foreign investment and business, all contracts are obliged to be written in either English or French, without such provisions for Seychellois (Laversuch, 2008, p. 378).

Haiti's governmental relationship with its creole language has differed from that of the Seychelles. French has been the *de facto* language of the state from independence in 1804 and was afforded *de jure* status[3] in 1918 (Schieffelin & Doucet, 1994, p. 178). The native and dominant language of only a small minority of Haitians, French has always been the language of the elite in the country (Spears, 2010; Zéphir, 2010, pp. 60-62). Only until very recently, the president and the rest of the organs of the state would communicate exclusively in French to Haiti's citizens (DeGraff & Ruggles, 2014). From the 1960's through the 80's, the status of *kreyòl* was improved piecemeal, with limited license to use the language in the legal system in 1964, to the country becoming "officially bilingual" in 1987 (Schieffelin & Doucet, 1994, p. 178). Nonetheless, the two languages are not held in equal regard by the government. Although there has been an increasing proportion of Haitian used in parliamentary debates, French continues to be used and preferred (Zéphir, 2010, p. 61). French also remains the near exclusive written language for communications prepared by nearly every government agency, and is used for the *Moniteur*, which is the state gazette for publishing all laws and decrees (Etienne, 2000; Zéphir, 2010, p. 61). All of this in effect insulates the government and limits interaction between them and the wider population, as it is estimated that perhaps only 7% of the population of Haiti is bilingual with French and Haitian, and therefore able to completely participate in the state (Schieffelin & Doucet, 1994, p. 178).

The fact that vast majority of Haiti's population of eleven million is monolingual in *kreyòl* comes despite the fact that Haiti has spent much of its history providing education exclusively through the medium of French (DeGraff, 2018, p. 355). After nearly two centuries of providing education through what was effectively a foreign language to the population of the island, and having little academic success to show for it, the 1980's saw the government launch the "Bernard Reform," named after the education minister at the time (Locher, 2010, p. 177). This saw the proposed introduction of a bilingual French-Haitian educational program to improve education outcomes, by which Haitian would be the language of instruction and French a mandatory subject until grade six, after which point, they would change roles. As part of this reform, a debate surrounding how to write Haitian emerged as well, with two predominant camps: those who supported a phonemic orthography, those who wanted to mirror French writing more closely (Schieffelin & Doucet, 1994, pp. 183-185). This has resulted in an *òtograf kreyòl* which is phonemic and widely representative of the spoken Haitian of the masses, in an effort to increase educational outcomes. Nonetheless, there are two systemic simultaneous problems which fuel one another and have worked together to prevent a marked improvement in academic achievement. In the four decades, since the Bernard Reform was introduced, there has been limited success in its uptake in schools. In the first ten years following the launch of the reform, less than 20% of public schools were adhering to the new curricula (Républic d'Haïti, 1990; Locher, 1991). More recently, it has been suggested that still fewer than half of schools are run according to the reform directives (Locher, 2010, p. 179). The government has responded ambivalently to this problem and has at times actively worked against its own efforts by working to primarily provide instructional materials in French to schools, particularly rural schools, rather than in Haitian (Trouillot-Lévy, 2010, pp. 217-219). At the same time, and as will be discussed in depth later in this section, the general population holds a hostility towards *kreyòl* as a language of instruction, and there is a

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[3] A term meaning legal recognition.

strong preference for children to be educated in French (Schieffelin & Doucet, 1994; Locher, 2010; Trouillot-Lévy, 2010; DeGraff, 2018).

In contrast, the Seychelles have experienced a much more robust usage of *seselwa* in the education system over roughly the same time period. Prior to independence, the language of instruction in schools operated by religious institutions was French until it was replaced by English from 1944 with the establishment of public schools by the British colonial authorities (Bollée, 1993, p. 88). After the Seychelles became an independent country and a few years after the adoption of the creole language as an official language, the socialist government established Seychellois as the medium of instruction in schools (Laversuch, 2008, pp. 378-379). The rationale behind this decision was two-fold: on the one hand, it came on the back of decades of educational under-achievement and a belief in the theory that teaching through the creole mother tongue would reverse this, and on the other it was a conscious effort by a revolutionary government to promote "a respect and appreciation for their cultural heritage and a positive identification with their own culture and language" (Ministry of Education, 1985, as cited in Bollée, 1993, p. 88). What has resulted is a curriculum in which Seychellois is the language of instruction for the first four years of primary school, after which point, English is gradually transitioned to take that role, with Seychellois becoming a subject alongside French taught as an additional language (Bollée, 1993, pp. 89-90; Laversuch, 2008, p. 380). While there has been sustained governmental support for continuance to the present day of this educational model and the promotion of *seselwa* as the first national language, this has not translated to universal public support.

As is the case with most creole languages around the world, Seychellois is perceived by a great many of its own speakers as a language to be used only in informal contexts (Laversuch, 2008, p. 387). This resistance to the right to use the creole language in public and formal interfaces can be seen in the broader context of other indigenous languages in post-colonial environments where long-standing prejudices are baked into the local population as a result of decades or centuries of marginalization and discrimination at the hands of the former imperial administration (D'Offay, 1980; Wolff, 2006). These negative feelings play out most prominently in the education system. Although *seselwa* has been an integrated part of schooling in the archipelago for several decades, some inhabitants would prefer the promotion of English (or, to a lesser extent, French) as it is viewed as a language of economic and social advancement, and believe that the continued preference for the creole language is a means of preserving an advantage inherent to the natively French- or English-speaking minority already rooted in the upper-echelons of society (Laversuch, 2008). That being said, Seychellois is broadly utilized in all manner of contexts on the islands, including as the language of debate in the national assembly. There is additionally a significant amount of local pride in the language and a perception that it is an inalienable marker of national identity (Bollée, 1993).

If the view of Seychellois in popular discourse has been mixed, bordering on positive, the view of Haitian can be described more negatively. There is a widely held belief that *kreyòl* is a "broken" or "poorly formed" version of French, and this view permeates throughout nearly every level of Haitian society (Schiefflin & Doucet, 1994, p. 193; Trouillot-Lévy, 2010; Zéphir, 2010; DeGraff, 2018, p. 355). Historically, Haiti was described by academics as existing within a framework of diglossia, with French serving as the high language and Haitian serving as the low language (Ferguson, 1959). However, recent scholars have taken issue with the term "diglossia" to describe the language situation in Haiti, particularly as it would insinuate that bilingualism is widespread, whereas it has been postulated that only between five and ten percent of the total population of Haiti speaks French, with a grey area as to what that actually entails in terms of

linguistic competence (Zéphir, 2010, pp. 60-61). Regardless of the descriptive terminology, it remains true that the population of Haiti generally sees the creole language as inferior, and French as superior. This dynamic plays out in the educational sphere, with widespread popular resistance to governmental efforts to introduce Haitian as the language of instruction. French is seen as the language most integral to advancement in social and economic life, and for that reason there are demands for it to be prioritized. Particularly, the upper-classes take issue with the promotion of *kreyòl* and see it as a threat to their social standing (Trouillot-Lévy, 2010, pp. 219-220). There has been, however, an effort by scholars and language activists to counter these narratives and to improve attitudes towards Haitian, especially in the context of a national rebuilding effort following the 2010 earthquake which devastated the country (Cerat, 2015).

## 4    Discussion and conclusion

Throughout this paper's enumeration of the current status of the creole languages in Haiti and the Seychelles, there have been a few common themes meriting further discussion. For one, the popular views of *kreyòl* and *seselwa* as lesser or otherwise inferior languages is a common refrain as it relates to other creoles spoken around the world. Even the promotion of Seychellois by the state in most aspects of public life has not led to a total eradication of this belief. However, the fact that usage of the language remains robust among a relatively small population base, even in the face of a highly internationally oriented economy and two global languages already established in the country, should be noted. Additionally, the effect that economic and political stability can have in relation to educational systems cannot be understated. Despite both countries having initiated reform programs in an effort to improve outcomes through the medium of their respective creole languages at roughly the same times, only the Seychelles can truly call their initiative a success. State support for linguistic promotion should be seen in both of these nations as important in determining successful aftereffects, but only so far as the state is able to operate a bureaucracy, at least as it relates to public education.

This paper has endeavoured to illustrate the contemporary status of the Haitian and Seychellois Creole languages, working through the lenses of the languages' roles in government, education, and popular discourse. Haiti's long-troubled history and unstable state apparatus have contrasted with the Seychelles' security and prolonged period of peace. This is reflective in their governments' relationships to the languages, with Haiti behaving with ambivalence or occasional hostility, while the Seychelles have actively supported their creole as a driver of educational success and national identity. Both countries provide case studies worthy of further investigation as they relate to the past, present, and futures of creole languages worldwide, as two of the only four countries in the world which have afforded them official status.[4]

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[4] The other two countries are Aruba and Curaçao where Papiamento/Papiamentu, a creole of unclear Spanish or Portuguese lexical base, is spoken.

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